

EXCLUSIVE POLITICS VICTORIA FIRE

# Two towers, two fires - but both signed off by same engineering firm

By [Clay Lucas](#)

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The fire safety engineering firm found by a tribunal to be most to blame for a 2014 flammable cladding blaze in Docklands also signed off on Neo200, the Spencer Street apartment tower that caught alight in February.

Last month the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal found that safety engineering company Thomas Nicolas, whose sole director is Con Nicholas, was responsible for the largest portion of the almost \$6 million it will cost to re clad the Lacrosse apartment tower on Latrobe Street.



The Neo200 blaze on Spencer Street on February 4. SIMONE FOX KOOB

That building started to burn about midnight on November 24, 2014, when it caught alight due to flammable cladding – the same type as in London’s deadly Grenfell tower fire.

In the Lacrosse fire, French backpacker Jean-Francois Gubitta left a cigarette burning on the balcony of the two-bedroom apartment he shared with five other people.

Mr Gubitta's cigarette sparked a fire that quickly climbed from his level-eight apartment to the roof of the 21-storey tower.

Fire crews safely evacuated about 400 occupants, but the flames – fuelled by flammable cladding – sparked a crisis among the builders and consultants responsible for Melbourne's many apartment towers.



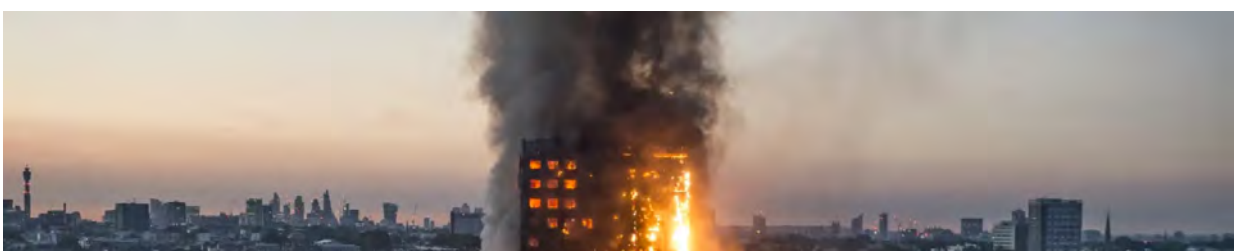
Docklands' Lacrosse apartments burn in 2014. GREGORY BADROCK

Investigators say last month's fire at the Neo200 apartments in Spencer Street was probably also started by a stray cigarette.

Both the Lacrosse and Neo200 towers were constructed by builders LU Simon and both used Thomas Nicolas as their fire engineer.

Mr Nicolas was the primary fire safety engineer on the Lacrosse tower. County Court judge Ted Woodward found in his ruling at VCAT that Thomas Nicolas was responsible for 39 per cent of the \$5.7 million costs related to the fire.

Judge Woodward found both Thomas Nicolas and building surveyor the Gardner Group made representations to the builder "that were misleading and deceptive in contravention of Australian consumer law".





London's Grenfell tower burns in June 2017. EVENING STANDARD

*The Age* called and emailed Thomas Nicolas to discuss the fires but received no response.

Thomas Nicolas is also understood to have been the fire engineer on the [Trilogi apartment block in Prahran, which was also covered in flammable cladding](#).

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## DOES YOUR BUILDING HAVE FLAMMABLE CLADDING?

Tell us your story.

*The Age* has been unable to confirm the firm was the fire engineer.

Thomas Nicolas is one of the city's most used fire engineers, listing among its clients Crown casino, the Freshwater Place apartment and office tower, and the sprawling Eden, Haven and Sanctuary apartments in Abbotsford.

*The Age* is not suggesting those projects used flammable cladding.

Many of the apartments in the Neo200 tower remain unoccupied more than a month after the fire. In all, 41 fire- and water-affected units in the block are empty.





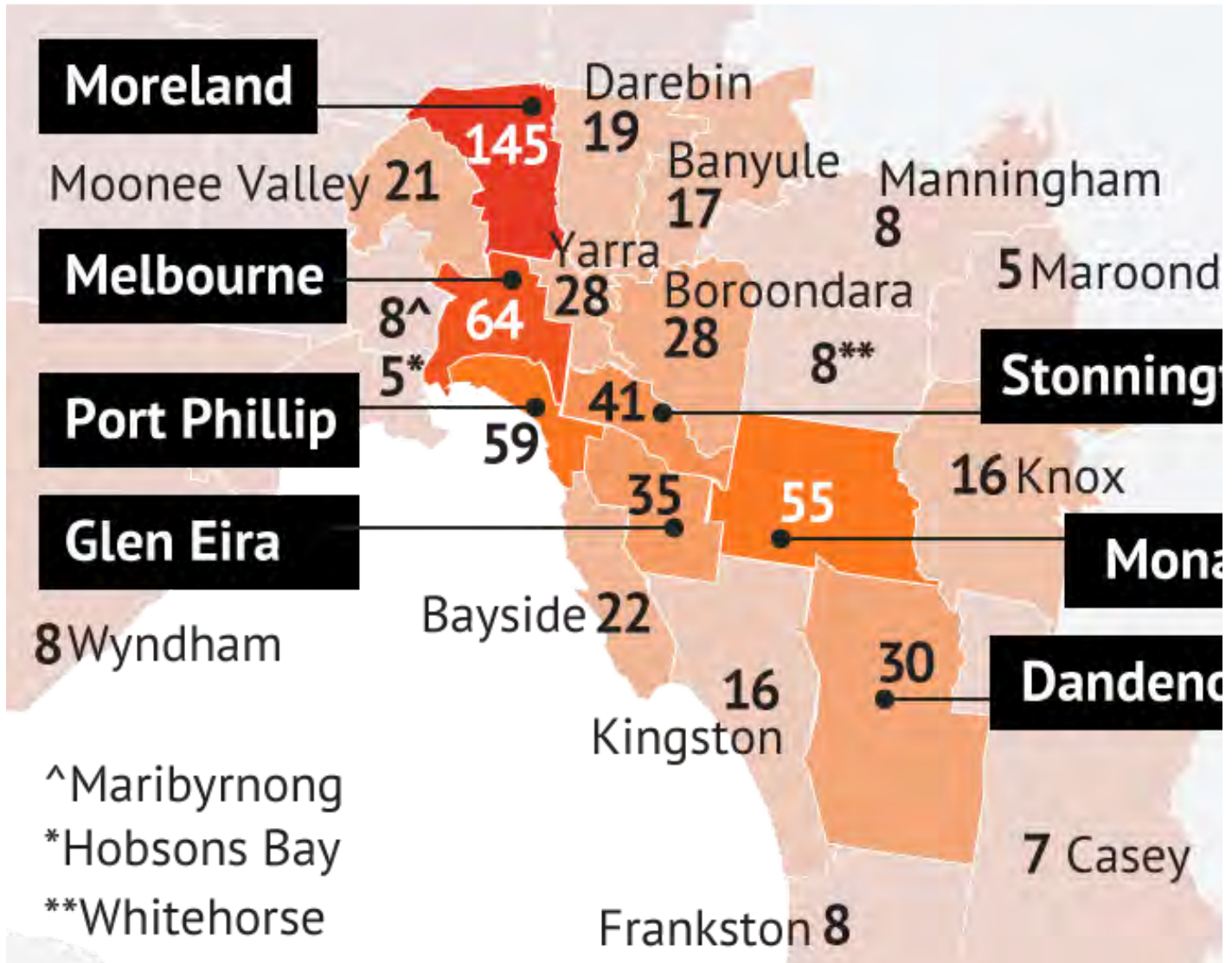
Prahran's Trilogi apartment building, pictured in 2017. JUSTIN MCMANUS

Designed by architects Hayball and built by LU Simon in 2007, the Neo200 tower has 371 apartments in total.

Of these, at least 24 apartments are the subject of emergency orders that mean residents will be unable to return for at least the next five months, and potentially up to one year.

### Flammable cladding distribution

Numbers of private buildings across Melbourne being investigated



Source: Victorian Building Authority



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